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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the theory and practice of teacher ethics. It defines ethics and examines the content of the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession adopted by the National Education Association (NEA) in 1975. An informal survey of 30 teachers found that none had a specific course or workshop in the area of ethics. When prompted to give specific ethical situations they face in the classroom, the three most common replies related to psychological (emotional) abuse, confidentiality, and physical abuse. Scenarios of situations dealing with these three ethical areas are presented, along with questions that consider possible responses. Teacher education programs are urged to offer a course or courses in teacher ethics. The course should focus on ethical codes pertaining to teaching, case studies and scenarios, and theoretical models of ethical reasoning. The NEA is encouraged to adopt a comprehensive code of ethics that specifically states and defines appropriate teacher behavior. K. Kitchener's model of ethical justification is presented as a tool to use in ethical decision making. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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Teaching and Ethics

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Abstract

Teacher ethics is reviewed through a discussion on practice and theory. It is suggested that teacher education programs contain in their curriculum courses specializing in teacher ethics. Such courses and instructional design should include: scenarios, ethical codes, theoretical models, and the concept of teacher caring. Presented for reflection are: practical scenarios and the applicable NEA Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, Kitchener's model of ethical justification, and an integration of the above stated points as a contextual framework for the design of a teacher education course in ethics.

Teaching and Ethics

Imagine this scenario:

> It is Friday afternoon, you have about fifteen minutes of preparation time before your last class of the day. You are exhausted and ready to go home. As you enter your classroom to grade papers, you see Jane leaving the girl's bathroom crying. Jane is one of your best senior students (age 16). She is intelligent, attractive, and active in the school's student government. Jane asks if she can talk to you in private. As you shut the door to your classroom, Jane yells out, "Are the rumors true? I don't know what to do!" You ask Jane to enlighten you about the rumors. "The rumors about me and Mr. Franks seeing one another are true!" Mr. Franks is Jane's gymnastic coach and instructor. He is in the process of getting a divorce, around late twenties or early thirties, attractive, and a charmer. Your mouth drops wide open and you are speechless. Jane continues. Over the past year, I have been friends with Mr. Franks until the last three months. He would invite me over his house and we would talk. Well, the talking led to kissing and last night he had his hands all over me. The next thing I knew, he started to take my clothes off. I became extremely scared and ran out of his house partially unclothed!

As a teacher, you are presented with this situation. You are tired, ready to go home, frustrated, and confused. What are your options? What do you do? Are you ethically bound to do something? Is this an ethical situation?

Teaching is a complex process. Students have changed as well as the administrative structure of many schooling organizations. Students, teachers, and administrators all interact with one another at an interpersonal level. When dealing with human behavior, there are many, if not endless, avenues of expression. When dealing with such human behavior, there is not always a correct (right) or incorrect (wrong) response to a specific situation. In the above scenario, there are many possible options to resolve the situation, but which option is the best? Is there a best possible option? What are the appropriate procedures for one (teacher, administrator) to take in

order to resolve the conflict and correct any wrong doings? This is a question of ethics.

What is Ethics?

Ethics deals with the idea of right or wrong. What is right or wrong? Many of us feel we have learned the answer to this question from our parents, teachers, religious organizations, friends, and respected leaders. But, where does the term originate, and what does it mean?

Ethics is a part of philosophy that dates back to the time of Socrates. Ethics is concerned with the investigation of human behavior. Ethics or ethos means "character." So if one studies ethics, they study what people do and how they do it (White, 1988). Is what people do right or wrong and how they are doing it right or wrong? More specifically: Is what a teacher does right or wrong and how this teacher does it right or wrong? Storm (1989) defines ethics as "these value choices concerning actions and attitudes that affect more than one person or which affect one's own character, thereby affecting others. These choices are moral or ethical when they involve consideration of precepts that regulate human conduct such as right and obligations and principles such as respect for person, justice, and reciprocity."

"The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and the nurture of democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all." These are the first two sentences to the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession adopted by the 1975 NEA Representative Assembly (Strike, 1992).

To many practicing teachers, the above statement means very little due to its philosophical orientation. What does it mean when one states "the nurture of democratic principles"? The Code of Ethics for some teachers may be too general and for other teachers too specific. Nash (1991) states that codes of ethics are written in the language of moral exhortation, general principles, and are rarely practice-specific. Prospective teachers are often left ill-equipped to solve concrete ethical problems and to think clearly about the moral complexities of the schools and the overall

profession.

Are teachers educated in the area of teacher ethics? If one were to research the topic of teacher ethics, it becomes apparent that there is a lack of information and research in this area. Ashton (1991) confirms this statement by acknowledging the need for literature in this specific area; "the meagre literature available on the moral responsibilities of teaching offers clear evidence of this neglect." So where does this leave us?

In a quest to seek answers, this author asked 30 practicing teachers the following question: "What are the most common ethical issues you face as a teacher?" Sounds like a simple question, but the majority of teachers were unable to respond to the question as stated. Upon reflection, the majority of the teachers felt that the most common ethical issue they face each day is a lack of education in the area of teacher ethics. None of the 30 teachers had a specific course nor workshop in the area of ethics. When prompted to give specific ethical situations they face in the classroom or heard about from colleagues, the three most common replies related to psychological (emotional) abuse, confidentiality, physical abuse. Psychological (emotional) abuse, confidentiality, physical abuse, and teacher ethics training will be examined in the context of this paper.

Psychological (Emotional) Abuse

Imagine this scenario:

> John, the class clown, has "pushed all your buttons." It seems that everytime you yell at him, he stops being inappropriate, but after a few hours, he starts back at it again. When your back is turned to write on the board, you hear all this laughter, once you turn around, you see John with this big grin on his face. Every chance you get, you try to give John the benefit of the doubt but to no avail. You are no longer able to be patient. John has a low "D" in your class, and you know he has no respect for you as a person. Sending John to the principal has failed because upon his return, his level of anger has increased. You feel powerless because all your attempts to control the situation have failed. You fully

understand that your interactions with John have turned into a power struggle. With this in mind, you try to limit the amount of interactions with John. Near the end of the school day, while in math class, you ask the class the following question: "$A^2 + B^2 = ?$" Before you can call on a student with his or her hand raised, John yells out, "Don't you know the answer, Pat?" John calls you by your first name and fully knows it is inappropriate behavior on his part. You reply in the following manner: "What a stupid and ignorant response coming from a nobody! For such a little man, you have a big mouth. Do you think such immature behavior is really going to help your 'D' grade in this class?" John is silent, as is the entire class. Is this unethical behavior on the part of the teacher? The scenario may seem extreme but the question is still valid.

The 1975 NEA Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, Principle I, Sections 4, 5, and 8 state: (4) "Shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health and safety; (5) Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement; and (8) Shall not disclose information about students obtained in the course of professional services, unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law" (Strike, 1992).

Has the teacher been unethical? Are the codes too specific or general? You be the judge! If one defines psychological (emotional) abuse as the intentional or unintentional harm of one's psychological-emotional being, does such a definition (construct) identify the problem, in turn, create a solution to the problem? Does the awareness of having untrained teachers in the area of ethics initiate one to seek solutions on how to resolve such a dilemma? If teaching is considered an ethical enterprise, should all teacher education programs contain courses in ethics? Before these questions can be answered. Consider the next scenario.

Confidentiality

Your grade book is on your dining room table and is open. You are expecting your neighbor to come over your house to borrow your laptop computer. Your neighbor, Mrs. Jones, has a child in your class and is always asking you how well her child is doing compared to the other neighborhood children. Mrs Jones arrives, and you invite her to come in and sit at the table. As you seat Mrs. Jones, your phone rings, and you leave the room. Being inquisitive, Mrs. Jones reads your grade reports while you are talking on the phone in the other room. She finds out that her son is in the top five percent of the class. The next day, the principal asks you to stop by her office to discuss a situation relating to Mrs. Jones. You come to find out that Mrs. Jones told the parents of two students in your class that her son is a much better student than their child and that her child is one of the brightest kids in the class. Mrs. Jones then continued to tell the parents about specific grades their children received compared to her child. Did the teacher act unethically?

Let's examine the NEA Code of Ethics of the Education Profession (1975). Principle I and II, Section 8 of each principle states: (8) "Shall not disclose information about students obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law." In this scenario, has confidentiality been violated? Before this question can be answered, one must define the concept "to violate confidentiality." To violate confidentiality, one must intentionally or unintentionally reveal information about a student that could, in turn, harm that student. The term "harm" is determined or defined by the student.

Is the teacher responsible for maintaining confidentiality when someone (Mrs. Jones) else actively tries to violate confidentiality? Or did the teacher even maintain confidentiality from the start? Did the teacher disclose information about the students obtained in the course of professional services? You be the judge.

Physical Abuse

Imagine this scenario:

> You are a student in Mrs. Pat's class who you know has a reputation for being assertive. Sitting next to you is Hellen, who Mrs. Pat has warned twice for speaking to you while the class has been instructed to silently read. When Mrs. Pat turns her back to write on the board, Hellen begins to talk to you again. In mid-sentence of Hellen's conversation with you, you notice Mrs. Pat walk behind Hellen's chair and swing the chair with Hellen in it, across the floor toward the door. The momentum of the chair forces Hellen to stumble toward the door. As Hellen is stumbling, Mrs. Pat forcefully grabs Hellen by the right arm and escorts her to the principal's office.

Is the teacher's behavior unethical? If one were to define physical abuse as to intentionally or unintentionally cause physical harm to a student, does this change one's conclusion about Mrs. Pat's behavior? The NEA 1975 Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, Principle 1, Sections 4 and 5 states: (4) "Shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or the health and safety, and (5) Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement." Has the teacher caused harm to the health and safety to the student? You be the judge!

What does this all mean, and what are the implications for teaching? There is a definite need for teachers to be educated in the area of ethics. There is a lack of information on the topic specifically written for practicing teachers, there is a lack of research on the topic, and few colleges or universities offer ethics classes in their teacher education programs.

Teacher education programs should specifically offer a course(s) in teacher ethics. The course should focus on examining existing ethical codes pertaining to teaching, case studies and scenarios, and theoretical models of ethical reasoning. The course should have both a theory and

practice orientation.

It is further suggested that the NEA adopt a comprehensive code of ethics that specifically state and define appropriate teacher behavior. The American Psychological Association (1992) has such a code of ethics. The model used by the American Psychological Association could be extrapolated and applied to the teaching profession.

Case studies and scenarios should be part of the practical training of future teachers. Beyer (1991) states that there should be an integration of theory and practice along with reflection in a teacher education program. Anything less would be an injustice to the teaching profession.

Along with specialized ethical codes, case studies, and scenarios comes theory. Kitchener (1984) developed a model of ethical justification which can be generalized to teaching (Refer to Figure 1). Kitchener provides the reader with a tool to use in ethical decision making.

Insert Figure One About Here

At the bottom level, information is taken in by the senses. Facts of the situation and ordinary moral sense leads one into the Intuitive Level. At the Intuitive Level, immediate judgments and actions are made. From here, the next level is the Critical-Evaluative. Reasoned judgments and evaluation takes place at this level. One examines alternatives and consequences. The Critical-Evaluative level is divided into three sections: Rules, Principles, and Ethical Theory. One uses rules, laws, codes, etc., as a means of decision. Principles such as autonomy, nonmaleficience, beneficence, justice, and fidelity are used in the decision process. Lastly, Ethical Theory relates to creating the greatest balance of good over evil - prima facie. Kitchener's model of ethical justification would make a solid keystone to any ethics course.

When discussing teacher ethics, it is important to mention caring. Caring, as a concept to be taught and practiced, is an integral part of producing ethical and effective teachers. Future teachers need to learn how to care for their students and for their students to feel a sense of care from their teachers (Roger, 1991; Dempsey, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991). It is hoped that a teacher who is caring will conduct himself or herself in a professional and ethical manner. The entire atmosphere of the class should revolve around caring.

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Figure 1. A model of ethical justification